

Coaching Teenagers (and Younger Children)

INTRODUCTION

Teenagers with attention disorders often struggle at the middle and high school level because schools place increasing demands on them to organize themselves and work independently. They routinely forget to write down assignments, complete homework, or hand it in on time. They have tremendous difficulty using their time wisely, both in school and at home. They often don't know how to break down long-term assignments and develop reasonable time lines—or follow the time lines they create.

These students are often bright and capable, with adequate academic skills. And many want desperately to succeed. What gets them in trouble are poor organization and time management skills—along with feelings of discouragement accrued over years of failing to meet the expectations of parents, teachers, and even themselves.

We have developed a coaching model to help teenagers with attention disorders and executive skill deficits be more successful in school and reach the career goals they set for themselves. Our model has two phases: In phase 1, the coach works with the student to develop a realistic set of long-range goals and a plan for meeting those goals. In the second phase, the coach works with students on a regular basis to help them plan their time, organize assignments, break down tasks, develop effective study skills, and, above all, to act as a supporter and cheerleader. A brief description of this process follows.

Coaching is described in greater detail in our book *Coaching Students with Executive Skills Deficits*

(Dawson & Guare, published by Guilford Press).

PHASE 1: LONG-TERM GOAL-SETTING

Long term goal-setting with secondary level students includes setting goals with respect both to high school graduation and to post-high school plans. If these plans include college, it also makes sense to identify what kind of college the student hopes to attend (e.g., 2-year, 4-year, state university, liberal arts college). If the student has a particular college her or she would like to attend, this can be included as part of the goal. The steps in this session are as follows:

Step 1: Ask the student to describe his or her long-term goals. These goals may be vague at first and need refining through clarifying questions from the coach: Do you plan to graduate from high school? Are you taking college, general or vocational track classes? What do you hope to do after you finish high school—e.g., continue with further schooling or job training, or get a job, what kind of a job the student hopes to get, etc. Help the student be as specific as possible.

Step 2: Working with one goal at a time, determine what steps the student needs to take in order to achieve that goal. This may be as simple as getting passing grades in all classes, or it may be more complicated. If a student is applying to a competitive college, for instance, goals may include making the honor roll, enrolling in honors level classes, participating in extracurricular activities, and ensuring that the student signs up for the kinds of classes required by the college her or she is interested in.

Step 3: Discuss what obstacles will need to be overcome in order to achieve that goal. Many of these obstacles will be behavioral: choosing to do more interesting things than homework, leaving assignments to the last minute with a resulting loss in quality, skipping classes, forgetting to hand in homework, etc.

Step 4: Discuss how the student can work to overcome the obstacles he/she has identified. For instance, if leaving things until the last minute is an obstacle, the student might decide that making and following a time line for

long-term projects might help. If forgetting homework is a problem, developing a cueing system to help remember homework might address this obstacle. We recommend that the coach and student work together to identify one or two strategies to address each obstacle.

Step 5: At this point, the coach helps the student identify what environmental supports or modifications need to be put in place in order to enhance the likelihood of success. This might include test-taking modifications such as extended time limits or taking tests in a quiet room, access to tutorial services for weak subject areas, a daily or weekly homework monitoring system to help the student stay current with assignments, assistance with time management or organizational skills, a homework incentive system, etc.

Step 6: The last step in this session is for the coach to check with the student one last time to ensure that the plan being developed is realistic and within the capabilities of the student to achieve. Although plans can be revised as necessary as the coaching continues, every effort should be made to develop a plan at the outset that has a reasonable chance of success.

These goals should be reviewed periodically in daily coaching sessions to help the student remember what he/she is ultimately working toward. Reworking these goals can be done from time to time, as the student's interests change and as his/her thinking becomes clearer. Coaches may also want to incorporate the intermediate step of planning marking period goals, described below.

Modifications for Younger Students

Coaching can be very effective for students at the middle school level. However, youngsters at this age do not think long-term and for this reason the Long Term Goal Setting phase should be modified. Rather than having students think about goals for next year or after they complete school, we find it helpful for them to think in terms of what they want to accomplish in the course of one marking period. For this reason, we have developed a Marking Period Goals form which can be used for this purpose. Although coaches may want to introduce the coaching process with a discussion of longer-term goals, we suggest they move fairly quickly to a discussion of what the student hopes to accomplish in the current marking period. The discussion should take up each subject area individually and should cover what grade the student would like to earn and the

steps they think they need to take to earn that grade. Where relevant, the discussion should also address the grades the student is currently earning in those subjects. Coaches may need to help students develop a realistic plan so that they don't set unreachable goals (e.g., if a student is currently flunking French, it may be unreasonable to think that he/she can bring the grade up to an A).

Another middle school modification is to make coaching an assigned part of their daily schedule. Whereas by high school we believe coaching needs to be a voluntary process which the student willingly agrees to, at the middle school level, it may be possible to build coaching in as part of a student's IEP or 504 Plan. When this occurs, however, one goal of coaching should be to help the student see the benefits of it so that he/she will want to continue to process willingly for as long as it is needed.

PHASE 2: DAILY COACHING SESSIONS

The purpose of the daily coaching session is primarily to help the student plan what tasks he or she has to accomplish before the next coaching session and to identify when the task will be completed. With the exception of the first session, each session follows the same format using the acronym REAP (Review, Evaluate, Anticipate, Plan).

The first session begins with a review of the outcome of the long-range goal-setting session. The coach prompts with an open-ended question such as "What was it we talked about when we met before?" or "Tell me what you remember about the goals you set at our last meeting?" Although notes from the long-range goal setting session can be referred to, the student begins by answering this question based on his or her own recollection of that meeting. The session then moves forward to a discussion of immediate tasks and responsibilities, beginning with an overview of whatever longer term obligations the student may have, including school work as well as extracurricular responsibilities (e.g., sports activities, clubs, jobs, etc.).

The coach then asks the student to identify what the student hopes to accomplish before the next coaching session. These should be written down and includes all academic tasks, both homework due the next day as well as long-term projects that need to be started or upcoming tests or quizzes that need to be studied for. Here, the student may need help developing time-lines or setting reasonable study goals for tests. The student may also want to work on behavioral goals (e.g., "answer more questions in Spanish class." or "stay after school for extra help in biology"). Once the student identifies the specific tasks he/she plans to do, the coach has him/her say when he/she plans to do each task. Have the student be as specific as possible with respect to when the task will be accomplished (e.g., "during 8th period study hall" or "between 7 and 8 pm this evening").

The meeting concludes with a brief assessment of how the session went and words of encouragement. Both the stu-

dent and the coach should have a copy of the written plan to take away from the session.

All subsequent sessions begin with a Review of the tasks identified at the previous coaching session to determine if the plans were carried out as intended. Referring to the written plan completed at the previous session, the coach reads each item on the list and asks if the student did the task. The student is then asked to rate (Evaluate) how well he or she accomplished the task, perhaps using a rating scale. A brief discussion about the goals set and the student's performance follows.

The next step is to have the student Anticipate work that he or she has to do in the near future. Now a new plan is developed. This may mean transferring relevant information from the previous plan and adding any new assignments, tests, or responsibilities that may have come up since the previous session. The final step, as in the first session, is to have the student Plan what will be done before the next coaching session. And, again, the session should end with words of encouragement from the coach.

Particularly in the early stages of the coaching process, the emphasis by the coach is on support or encouragement. If the student frequently fails to follow the plans he/she has devised, the student is helped to evaluate where the plans are breaking down, but the coach may also want to help the student revise his/her plan or long-term goal to make it more realistic. As times goes on, and the student and coach become comfortable with each other, the coach may be able to be more direct in challenging the student to accomplish his daily tasks. Some coaches we have worked with report that for students who also receive special education services (such as an organizational studies class), they find it helpful to bring in the special education teacher so that the coach can continue to play a predominantly supportive role while the teacher can provide a realistic picture of how the student is performing and can make recommendations for what might need to change.